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Growing Up as Nisei in America

When I was asked to speak of my growing up in America, with a cultural difference as mine, I had to take a long look backwards. I thought that I could not even begin by quoting A.E. Housman's "When I was one and twenty", an age five whole decades ago, but return to my childhood years. I then remembered from an interview with Penny Moore, a reporter at the time for WNCI, that she referred to ourselves as "hyphenated Americans", Italian-American and Japanese-American. So in speaking of myself as Japanese-American, I define my racial origin and the fact that I am an American citizen by birth. In more ways than one, I do believe that I am more American than my physical features indicate.

I was born a Nisei, second generation Japanese, in California. Our parents were the Issei, first generation. The Japanese are the only minority group that distinguishes the generations numerically, and now there are the Sansei, third generation, and the Yonsei, the fourth. I grew up in Sacramento, the state capitol, through the so-called Roaring Twenties, the flapper era, the Great Depression, and the pre-World War II stretch of peace. When very young, I did not know that the role of the orientals in this country began ten years before the American Civil War, and that the Japanese immigrants started coming to the West Coast about 1890 to seek a livelihood in a land of promise. I could not have guessed then that anti-oriental hostility dominated West Coast politics and would later affect the course of national affairs and my own life.

Historically, the Pacific Coast drew towards its shores Asian immigrants, just as the Atlantic Coast received European immigrants. When needed labor dwindled after the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1892, the early Japanese immigrants were recruited to work on the farms, the railroads, ~~the~~ the mines and canneries. Nine out of ten of the first immigrants were unmarried men from the areas of southern Japan. After settling here, they sent for wives from their homeland and established families.

Unlike these people, my Father did not come to the United States as a laborer, but as a student in 1904. He had finished high school in Japan, but in this country he started in high school all over again to learn English. He had studied English in Japan, but found the language difficult to master. He then went on to major in mining engineering at the University of Nevada and later transferred to the University of California in Berkeley. My Mother came to this country as a school teacher. She had finished normal school, equivalent to our teachers college, and had taught for a while, during the ten years of engagement to Father. They were married in California.

The ethnic community where I grew up comprised my world. situated towards the river and limited by housing restrictions, but colorful and exciting to a child. We called this section of Sacramento Nihonmachi, or Japanese town. I suppose a stranger strolling along the streets would have felt transported to a foreign village. For here in Japanese town were not only houses with pretty gardens, but also small hotels; some boarding houses for migrant laborers who followed the crops up and down the state at harvest times; a drug store where I was often sent to get Japanese remedies as well as prescribed medicines; hardware stores that stocked Japanese cutlery and bamboo utensils as well as U.S.-made tools; shops that carried Japanese cosmetics as well as American clothes and fabrics, shoe stores and a busy fresh fish market where I would

be fascinated at the sight of an octopus suspended from a ceiling rack and wooden boxes of large tuna and sea bass packed in ice. There was even a hopsital, staffed by Japanese professionals. In this area were represented Japanese from all walks of life, as in the childhood rhyme of "Doctor, lawyer, merchant, chief. . ." But clusters of other ethnic families also lived here, the Chinese, Mexicans, Blacks, some Ttali-ans and Austrians. Our home was a gathering place for friends of different nationalities who were welcomed warmly by our parents.

It might interest you to know that in our family of nine children (I am the oldest), the girls were given Japanese names -- Toyo, Hisa, Mae and Masa -- but that my five brothers have American names, William, Roy, Howard, Joe and Lee. In fact, Father was so interested in American History that when twins were born (between Hisa and Mae) who later died in their infancy, he named them Benjamin and Franklin. And my youngest brother Lee was named after Robert E. Lee. Although I was the oldest, my brother Bill, a year younger than I, was always considered the chonan, the eldest son and heir.

What was it like to grow up in a family like ours? At times, it was downright tough, growing up American by schooling and associations, but having to conform to customs, traditions, and modes of behavior that our parents considered proper. As it was, my gentle, courteous Mother would sometimes refer to us rather wryly as yabanjin, her barbarians. I recall an essay that my brother Joe wrote in high school about her. He described her endearing qualities, but he ended his composition with the terse comment: "But she is a hard woman!" His English teacher was so taken with the essay that she came to meet Mother, the latter a little embarrassed when she learned why.

I can point out my own experience with her discipline, when I was in junior college. One morning I was in a hurry to leave for school. If I missed the first bus, I would miss the right transfer bus that would get me to the campus in time for my eight o'clock class. So I gulped down my coffee and toast, picked up my pile of books and rushed through the hall, kicked the door open and was almost out. I suddenly heard Mother call after me in ~~her~~ firm, no-nonsense tones, "Will you please come here?" I answered, "Oh, Mom, I'll miss the bus!" She simply repeated, "Will you please come back here?!" So I reluctantly walked back and faced her. She looked me in the eye and said, "Now you may go, but when you reach the front door, open it with your hand and catch it with the same hand so it does not slam." I missed the second bus, to be sure, and was late for class. When I returned from school, she said no more, but gave me a wise smile.

Growing up in a family like ours also meant learning to be bilingual. Mother usually spoke Japanese to us, but actually she understood far more of our English and current slang than she would admit. Father spoke English to us because of expediency and acted as our interpreter and translator when our Japanese proved inadequate. Both of them enjoyed reading, so we grew up with books. Mother read widely in translations, and it was she who introduced me to the names of Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Chopin, Beethoven, Shakespeare, Ibsen and others. Father read as much, in both English and Japanese, and often read books we brought back from the library. One summer he read Kathryn Forbes' Mama's Bank Account, and each evening he would give a chapter by chapter rendering in Japanese. She thoroughly enjoyed the story. He followed this with the Gilbreth book, Cheaper by the Dozen, and though she relished this story of a large family, she remarked that the story came too close to reality for her.

Father was always deferred to as the head of the family, but we children somehow sensed that Mother's judgment often affected his decisions concerning us. In Japanese culture, the woman, wife or mother, is usually trained to be self-effac-

ing and humble before her husband. But Mother, despite her innate calm and conformity to traditions, could be assertive. With us she could be bluntly logical, outspoken when she had to be, and not easily swayed by the arguments of her "barbarians", yet we always received a fair hearing. But I must admit we sometimes called her "The Court of Last Appeal". Unperturbed, she would smile and say, "Thas allri. . Mama right". My brother Bill would mutter under his breath, "The darn trouble is that she is!"

The Issei felt that education would enable their children to enter occupations barred to them and be free of the intolerances they had had to endure. So they began sending their sons and daughters to colleges and professional schools, often through untold, tremendous sacrifices. After I finished junior college, then Bill, we went on to the University of California, Father's alma mater. And my family moved to Berkeley, so the others to come could attend the same university. But prejudice did not vanish. As the American-born generation graduated from the universities and colleges, the Nisei found it almost impossible to obtain jobs for which they were qualified, so many worked in menial labor. Engineers turned auto mechanics, and Father worked as a life insurance agent and interpreter. Girls with doctorate degrees became housemaids. Graduate chemists and physicists worked in their fathers' fruit stores. So before the war, the Japanese on the West Coast, like the rest of the world, lived quietly in their accustomed places, in the cities and on farms, in some professions, industry and services. These were the Japanese, not one type, not one truly homogeneous group, but simply men and women and their children, large and small, fat and thin, the healthy and the sickly, the good and the bad, with varying degrees of American and Japanese traits.

Then World War II brought changes into the lives of many peoples around the world. One small aspect of this change was the evacuation of the Japanese from the Pacific Coast states of California, Oregon and Washington from their homes into internment camps. I would like to describe for you what this forced exodus imposed upon some 120,000 Japanese who were uprooted.

So now let me take you back in time. At 7:55 a.m., Sunday morning, December 7, 1941, the United States Naval Station, Pearl Harbor, on the island of Oahu, Territory of Hawaii, was attacked by Japanese aircraft. I had just turned on the radio and had started to give my little son, two months old, his morning feeding. What I heard on that grim broadcast stunned me. As I absorbed the dreadful news, my immediate thought was how we Japanese living in this country would be affected. I soon learned. By that night, the Japanese on the West Coast began to feel the repercussions. All Japanese funds were frozen; credit was denied. Wholesalers stopped supplying Japanese merchants. Because of prohibitions against trading with the enemy, tradesmen lumped the Japanese Americans together with the foe overseas. That same evening I found that I could not buy milk and bread at the corner grocery store where I had been going for months. Milk companies ceased delivery to Japanese families.

After Pearl Harbor, feelings against all Japanese, citizens and aliens alike, ran high, and the vituperative voices of organized interests, politicians, and media on the West Coast clamored for their deportation or removal. A superpatriot chopped down four of the cherry trees along the Tidal Basin in Washington, D.C., because they had been a gift from Japan. The Tennessee State Department of Purchasing declared "open season on Japs, no license required". An elderly Japanese man and wife were shot to death in El Centro, California. The U.S. Attorney General reported numerous instances of crime and brutality against the Japanese between December 8, 1941 and March 31, 1942. And my brother Roy enlisted in the United States Army.

Immediately with the beginning of the war, the Department of Justice, through the Federal Bureau of Investigation, had arrested people suspected of being Japanese agents. There were repeated investigations and arrests wherever and whenever there were suspicions, and we were in constant fear of unexpected FBI raids.

On December 11, 1941, the Western Defense Command was established, and the entire West Coast was declared a theater of war, with General John L. DeWitt designated as military commander. Public temper became spiteful. We were already under curfew and had to be off the streets by eight p.m. and in our homes, and we were finding it difficult to shop or market for our large family.. By the end of January, commentators and newspaper columnists, witch hunters, varied groups and rabid "patriots" began inflaming public opinion. Only a handful of citizens and organizations -- a few churchmen, a small part of organized labor, the Naval Intelligence, some university presidents -- dared speak out for the rights and interests of the Japanese Americans. It was when the Japanese problem was transferred to the War Department that the unprecedented abrogation of the civil rights of a racial minority occurred.

On February 19, 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, which authorized the War Department to set up military areas and exclude any or all Japanese from these areas. In the cities, a mounting number of aliens, the Issei, were being drawn into the FBI net, many on the slightest accusation or pretense. With the signing of the exclusion order, we realized that we would be forced out of our homes.

No one knew when the actual evacuation order would be issued. We were tense, not knowing what to expect, how to make preparations and when. By a series of 108 separate orders, General DeWitt ordered all Japanese removed from Washington, Oregon and California, and a portion of Arizona. The reason given was that of "military necessity", but no Japanese American, either in Hawaii or on the mainland, has ever been accused of either sabotage or espionage.

On March 2, 1942, the first evacuation areas were named, and on March 10, the Wartime Civilian Control Administration was established to assist in the evacuation. Since no preparation had been made for so huge a mass exodus, fairgrounds and race tracks were commandeered for use as temporary assembly centers, and there were eighteen of these. Army engineers went to work immediately to construct primitive quarters for the evacuees.

With others living around the San Francisco Bay region, my family was sent from Berkeley to the Tanforan Race Track in San Bruno, south of San Francisco. The evacuation was handled on an area basis, as one district after another was designated for exclusion. In Berkeley the larger families were moved out first, and we learned of this, the day before we had to leave. Bill, who was teaching bacteriology at the university, had called home in the afternoon to tell Mother that we had to leave the following morning at seven o'clock. Do you know what it is to leave a home you have lived in for years and abandon prized possessions? You see, we could take only what we ourselves could carry, which meant two pieces of luggage per person. Fortunately our large collection of books had already been packed and stored with a Caucasian friend. I called the Salvation Army and the Goodwill Industries to tell them that they could call for clean clothing, household equipment and furniture the next day. Through most of the night, Bill kept a bonfire going in the backyard to burn accumulations of old letters, school mementoes, things that we simply could not take with us or leave behind. It was not until we started discarding things and watching them burn that I could truly comprehend that we were being moved out, away from all that had been a part of my growing up.

The morning of our departure from Berkeley, a sunny April day, we gathered at a church, surrounded by military sentries standing guard with drawn bayonets. We were taken by chartered buses, under military guard, to the Tanforan Race Track, and

at the intake station under the grandstand, the men were frisked for contraband, and Father had ~~had~~ his old pocket knife confiscated. Our family, ~~was~~ to be known for the duration of the war by the family number of 13423, and not by our surname, was assigned to horse-stalls in one corner of the race track. We had no furniture, except for army cots. So we salvaged scrap lumber, and Father made a table and stools of differing heights, which served their purpose.

Even here in the assembly center curfew was imposed, and roll call was held every day in the morning and evening. Caucasian camp police patrolled their beat inside the center. Civil liberties were at a minimum. The entire camp was closely guarded, surrounded by watch towers manned by armed sentries, and searchlights played around the camp at night. We were introduced to, and trained in, communal living from the beginning of our internment. We were at the assembly center for six months, from April on, and then came orders that we were to be moved again, this time to a permanent camp, termed a relocation center, in Utah. There were ten such permanent camps, all located in desolate wildernesses.

My family, with the exception of Bill who had come ahead with an advance group of volunteers, arrived at the new camp in Utah on October 3, 1942. He was waiting for us at the intake gate. A small band of Boy Scouts, in uniform, tooted and blared out on their brass instruments, in the dust and heat, their version of "Hail, Hail, the gang's all here!" Though we had grown accustomed to the sight of barracks at Tanforan, what I now saw in this new camp overwhelmed me with its isolation, where hundreds of low, black tar-papered barracks were lined up in rows through each block. There were no trees, no grass, ^{no} flowers, just an expansive stretch of gray desert land.

The population of the Utah camp that we called Topaz and christened "The Jewel of the Desert" numbered approximately 8,000, with most of the people from the San Francisco Bay area. Because of the size of our family, we were permitted to have the two center rooms in the barracks in Block 4. But in order to go from one room to the other, one had to go outside and then into the other room. This became tedious for Mother, when she needed to see any of my brothers, who occupied the second room. So she had Father cut out a section of the intervening wall and hung a curtain there. When that was done, the boys presented a formal complaint to Mother and stated that the action constituted "invasion of privacy"!

Those of us who were able-bodied worked, the professionals, like doctors and teachers, at 19.00 a month, the skilled at 16.00, and the unskilled at 12.00. By working I received a clothing allowance of \$3.75 a month, which, I found, was not enough for a child's pair of shoes, unless I saved for several months. I taught in the high school during the day and in evening school for adults, and later became a librarian in the camp public library, the schools and library no impressive buildings, but simple barracks, like our living quarters. Though it was a strange contrast to California, for here we encountered freezing winters, icy winds, blizzards, and dust storms, work provided a pattern of existence. So we were in Topaz for three years, and we were released after the defeat of Japan in 1945.

You have taken a long look backward with me at my childhood, the years of growing up as a second-generation Japanese, to the present. As you see, many changes have occurred in my life, some drastic, some sad, some glad. But as Mother used to say, with hope and faith, when she faced adversity, "Spring always returns to the waiting heart." When I would protest, "Mom, not the same spring!", she would reply, with assurance, "No, a new spring." So I thank you for listening, and I say to you: Domo arigato gozai masu -- thank you, thank you.